

1 of 1 DOCUMENT

The Chronicle of Higher Education

April 4, 2008 Friday

## 'How the University Works': Required Reading on the Future

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**SECTION:** CHRONICLE CAREERS; Pg. 1 Vol. 54 No. 30

**LENGTH:** 1969 words

Marc Bousquet's *How the University Works* should be required reading for anyone with an interest in the future of higher education, including administrators, faculty members, graduate students, and -- even more significantly -- undergraduates and their parents.

Published this year by New York University Press, the book confirms one's darkest fears, but it also offers some hope. On his Web site (see [howtheuniversityworks.com](http://howtheuniversityworks.com)), Bousquet, who is also a Brainstorm blogger for The Chronicle, sketches the culture of academe a generation from now, based on current trends -- and it's not a pretty picture for most professors and students:\*

More than 80 percent of the "faculty" will be adjuncts; upper-division undergraduates will do much of the teaching of lower-division students.

\* Tenure and curriculum will be the privilege of administrators.

\* At most institutions, whole fields of the liberal arts -- philosophy, history, music, literature -- will no longer be represented by departments.

\* Basketball coaches will earn as much as \$10-million a year, while "part-timers" teaching eight classes a year will earn less than the minimum wage.

\* While 10 percent of undergraduates will not work at all, the remaining 90 percent will pursue degrees while working 40 hours a week serving lattes to the nonworking students, correcting their papers, and doing their laundry and nails.

Bousquet's alternative to that dystopia is one in which the academic workers -- including the so-called graduate "students" -- continue to organize and push back against corporate-style administrations. *How the University Works* makes a strong case that unionization is the only realistic solution.

I first heard Bousquet speak at the Modern Language Association convention in 1997 in Toronto when I was on the academic job market for the first time. I hadn't had much success, but my advisers told me not to be daunted by that, since I was still A.B.D. and most positions were being filled by people who not only had the degree in hand but also had several peer-reviewed publications and considerable teaching experience.

The entry-level market was flooded with postdocs, lecturers, and visiting assistant professors. I was not yet competitive in that context. I had only been in graduate school for six years, and there were people ahead of me who had been preparing for a dozen years or more.

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What alarmed me was that I also knew people many years ahead of me with all of those credentials and no success in their job searches, either. I am talking about candidates with degrees from top departments, with famous advisers, multiple publications, luminous personalities, glowing teaching evaluations, and dissertations already under contract for publication. Beyond a certain escalating level of basic qualifications, the job market looked like a lottery, although most of us still publicly believed in the myth of academe as a meritocracy.

Even if you were a graduate student with serious doubts that kept you up at night -- "I've wasted my 20s and gone into debt for nothing" -- you probably didn't say anything for fear of being branded "unprofessional." If you complained, your adviser might just snuff you out with a few subtle, negative remarks in a letter of reference.

At that MLA convention, someone handed me a leaflet describing the "Welcome Session" for graduate students. The featured speakers were several senior professors offering sage advice on such matters as targeting your cover letter to the needs of the search committee (as if that could be known reliably from most job descriptions), keeping informed about the latest scholarship, looking out for conferences at which to present your dissertation chapters, and crafting your dissertation as a book from the beginning.

Well, duh.

They didn't seem to know that they were speaking to a cohort that had been manically professionalizing ourselves -- conferencing, publishing, and networking -- from the first semester of graduate school. Moreover, we had been told by our advisers -- thanks to a 1989 study by William G. Bowen that was widely off the mark -- that there would be ample tenure-track openings before the end of the decade. And now it turned out that if you were among the 40 percent who had clawed your way through graduate school, you probably had less than a 50 percent chance at a full-time job in academe -- not just this year but ever.

After all that work, your life was a coin toss.

The speakers were obviously well intentioned, but you could feel the rising anger of the audience. If someone had called for the occupation of the MLA conference headquarters, I think most of the room would have marched.

That was the context in which Bousquet -- then president of the MLA's Graduate Student Caucus -- gave his talk on the "Excremental Theory of Graduate Education." He came out from behind the conference table and stood near the audience, saying that he would need to read some portions of his talk because he wanted to get it right. He didn't look like a radical -- he wore a suit and a tie -- but his talk helped to reignite the academic labor movement within the MLA.

Essentially, as Bousquet explained, the "job market" is a fiction that coerces us into competition with each other instead of asking questions about the constructed nature of the academic workplace. The primary purpose of graduate programs, he argued, was not to produce degree-holders but to provide cheap, nondegreed teaching labor for the universities. The predicted job crisis had been solved by an influx of graduate students encouraged by the prospect of future job opportunities. That was the new job system, and it was working perfectly well. As a result, the completion of a doctorate in the humanities now marked the logical end of one's academic career rather than the beginning of it.

We were waste products who needed to be flushed from the system to make way for the next serving of exploited "apprentices."

Higher education -- which I had always assumed to have my best interests at heart -- had become a kind of pyramid scheme with us at the bottom, the new academic proletariat. And the situation would continue until we stopped thinking of ourselves as "students" and started organizing on the local and national levels.

Bousquet's talk -- the urtext of his current book -- was the first time I had heard anyone explain the labor system of higher education in a way that corresponded to my experiences. It applied the tools of critical analysis to our own circumstances. Instead of directing our energies at some amorphous and distant "discourse" -- the obligatory gesture of

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scholarly production in those days -- the academic labor movement, as it grew, began to identify specific institutions and individuals as responsible for the exploitation of thousands of people, and to take direct measures to hold them accountable. The movement exposed the corrupt bargain that rewarded a shrinking number of professors who often posed as radicals while acquiescing to corporatization of the university.

Under the leadership of Bousquet, Kirsten Christiansen, Gregory Bezkorovainy, Mark Kelley, and Cary Nelson (who is now president of the American Association of University Professors), among many others, the caucus used the media and the existing governance structure of the MLA to force the organization finally to give significant attention to the changing nature of academic careers. The "tenured bosses" would have to include the perspectives of graduate students and adjuncts -- now the majority of the profession -- in their formerly exclusive deliberations.

How the University Works marks a decade since that time, and, while much has certainly been done in terms of reports, resolutions, lamentations, and now-fashionable expressions of cross-generational empathy, I am sorry to say that little has been accomplished in terms of the experience of the average academic worker. If anything, the conditions of academic labor nationally -- now including those of the undergraduate worker-student -- are considerably worse than they were a decade ago, as Bousquet's book indisputably documents.

So it's one step forward and two steps back, year by year. If there is a flaw in Bousquet's analysis, it might lie in his apparent confidence in our society's willingness to support higher education, particularly the humanities, in an era of escalating tuition costs and declining opportunities after graduation.

Complicating that question is Bousquet's apparent optimism about the fungibility of academic resources, as if an administration could even consider cutting the basketball coach's salary or postponing a new laboratory to finance the health benefits of a few hundred adjuncts. Even the most intelligent, humane, and principled administrators -- and I know many such people exist -- can only nudge the direction of the oil tanker without powerful support from multiple constituencies, including the larger culture.

Unfortunately, the students, the alumni, the voters, and many trustees care about sports and business partnerships in ways that they will never care about faculty members in the humanities. The business community, outside of the very top levels, does not seem to want graduates who are going to ask hard questions about the tyranny of the market, such as whether it really is a "market" at all.

Neither is diversity of thought valued by the polarized factions who dominate our national conversation. Even worse, thanks to decades of right-wing propaganda and left-wing self-caricature, the public is generally hostile to humanities professors, whom they regard as hypocritical, pampered elitists spouting unintelligible jargon, instead of as middle-aged mothers with ongoing student-loan payments who teach remedial composition at three colleges for \$20,000 a year.

There is simply no narrative available in our culture for the professor or graduate student as exploited worker. And most people no longer seem to believe that the humanities have anything relevant or useful to teach.

Even at my own liberal-arts college, students sometimes show resentment at having to take general-education courses. I suppose that is a more virulent expression of American anti-intellectualism (see Susan Jacoby's new book, *The Age of American Unreason*), but I am sure it is also an outcome of the currently constrained conditions of employment for the young. Struggling under increasing debt loads and the need to work full-time as undergraduates -- as Bousquet describes in his most startling chapter -- most students can't afford to care about anything beyond career preparation.

In the end, academic labor has to find a way to speak to a larger audience -- to change the dominant narrative -- and *How the University Works* provides a blueprint for the next phase of that project.

The growing parallel in the experiences of students and teachers strikes me as the most important part of Bousquet's book: The student who spends six years working 40 hours a week and taking out loans to pay for college, only to discover little besides a string of part-time, low-paying jobs after graduation, if they graduate, has a lot in common with

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the majority of college teachers these days.

And both groups, despite what looks like privilege, now know what the average American worker has learned over the last couple of generations. In that common experience of economic injustice, lies the real potential for a transformation of higher education.

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**LOAD-DATE:** April 1, 2008

**LANGUAGE:** ENGLISH

**PUBLICATION-TYPE:** Newspaper

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